

## FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF LEARNING ENGLISH

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### Abstract

The preconditions that learning EFL in a setting like Indonesia may take place are among others sufficient exposure to and opportunities to use the language. In Indonesia the learning and the use of EFL is mostly done in the classroom. To make up for the classroom's limits and to raise the chances for language learning, the students need to be encouraged to develop their learning strategies so that gradually they gain their autonomy in language learning. This may help them to sustain their motivation to keep on learning the language. However, not all students adopt this kind of *agency* – to be the doers rather than recipients of their own learning. Some of them see the benefit of learning whereas others are reluctant to take responsibilities for their learning although they are given encouragement and opportunity as autonomous learners. The task – to make learners autonomous – is not an easy one, as training learners to be responsible for their own learning involves changing their attitudes: the learners' over reliance on the teacher or the teacher should be in charge of what happens in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. There are indeed some other factors that contribute to this predicament, for example, their (past) learning experience. How do EFL teachers develop the learners' sense of learning responsibility so that they understand why and how they learn and be willing to take an active role in their learning? First of all these teachers are to equip themselves with enough knowledge of English language skills and English linguistics so that they (teachers) can lead and guide their learners in the process of learning the language. That is to promote learners' autonomy, teachers should work on stages; it is part of a wider course design.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, learners' autonomy, agency, encouragement, responsibility, EFL, promote, course design.

### Introduction

English that is learned in a setting like Indonesia is called English as a foreign language (EFL). This language is usually learned and used only in a classroom. There are indeed some notions from experts that EFL may take place depending much on the amount of time of learning the language (Lindfors, 1980), what is learned and how it is learned (Ellis, 1994), the kind of socio-cultural exposure of the language being learned (Moon, 2000), and the process of learning the language at schools (Nunan, 1999; Foley and Thompson, 2003). The preconditions that the learning of EFL to take place are among others, sufficient exposure and opportunities to use the language both inside and outside the classroom (Lindfors, 1980; Chomsky, 1999; Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Foley and Thompson, 2003; Tomasello, 2003; O' Grady, 2005; Harmer, 2007; and Renandya & Yacobs, 2010). So, how much English these students learn in a language program among others depends on how much exposure to and opportunities to practice the language. I would like to illustrate the percentage of this English learning on the following "Language Learning Continuum" (Djonhar, 2012):

0%-learning \_\_\_\_\_ 100%-learning

As we know that the learning of EFL in most schools are done only in the classroom and students approximately learn the language for two hours a week. In addition, most language teachers have

experienced the frustration of spending an ample of energy in their students but gaining little response. For example, students are reluctant to do their homework, to use the target language while working in pairs or groups, and to use opportunities to learn outside the classroom. Such manners may stem from one common cause – students' over reliance on teachers. Students may feel that teachers are in charge of everything that happens in the classroom. Apparently, it is not possible for language learning to take place since students do not gain enough exposure to and do enough opportunities to practice the language. To compensate for classroom's time-limits and to raise the chances for language acquisition, students need to be encouraged to develop their learning strategies so that they may gradually gain their autonomy in language learning. This may help them sustain their motivation in keeping on learning the language. The discussion of the topic: *The Fundamental Principle of Learning English* may answer these two subsidiary questions – what is the fundamental principle of learning EFL?, what are teachers' and learners' roles to make learning autonomy happen?

### Discussion

What is the fundamental principle of learning EFL?

Chomsky (1999) asserts that principally children can learn any language since they also

possess the qualities owned by L1 and L2 children. Following the theory Universal Grammar (UG), the language learning principles are endowed in the children's brain. This enables them to make hypotheses of all the language input they get from their environment. To gain the language input they need environment that provides them with exposure to the language and opportunities to use this language. These preconditions in language learning may make the learning of EFL similar to that of English as first language (L1). Research on the development of an Indonesian child English was conducted by Djonhar (2012) and the findings showed that acquisition of EFL can be just like that of English as a first and second language. This is because this child gained sufficient exposure to and opportunities to practice English. Another study conducted by Renandya (2010) on a high-school student, grade 11 also showed that the subject's (a girl) English exceeded her peers. This is because she read English a lot and she frequently watched English movies/programs. Both subjects on this research practically are autonomous learners in a way that they facilitate themselves with English outside the classroom.

The idea of autonomous learning, i.e. encouraging students to learn and organize their studies independently outside the classroom, is a must in EFL setting. Students who are learning English have varying needs and goals they want to attain. These needs and goals may not be met during a two or three hour class they attend twice or once a week. Therefore encouraging students to organize their learning outside the classroom and to find ways to enhance their own learning independently is seen as a way of helping students attain their individual learning goals.

#### Teachers' and learners' roles in learning autonomy

Language is too complex and varied for there to be enough time to learn all they need to in the classroom. Learners of EFL still need much more exposure and opportunities to use English for real progress despite the number of class-hours of their English lessons in a week. Teachers should realize that not every single thing can be taught in class. In addition, if learners need help to use the language in real life, teachers are not always around to help learners. The solution of this problem is to teach learners how to learn both inside and outside the classroom.

Teaching and learning is a collaborative effort between teacher and learners to achieve the learning goal of the English program. So both teachers and learners have responsibilities to make learning happens. In this case teachers have to equip themselves with tools so that they can play their roles successfully. What tools are essential to carry out this responsibility is shown in the following diagram (Djonhar, 2012):

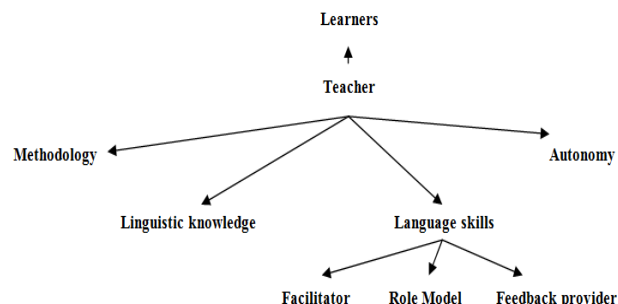


Figure 1.

In language teaching, teachers can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not suffice, just as the horse would remain thirsty if he stood still by the river waiting for his thirst to go away (Harmer, 2007). . And, in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they need to realize and to accept success in learning depends as much on the student as on the teacher. That is both of them (learners and teachers) should share responsibility for outcome. In other words, success of learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude.

Some degree of autonomy is essential to successful language learning. No matter how much students learn through lessons, there is plenty more they will need to learn by practice, on their own. Also changing needs of learners will require them to go back to learning several times in their lives: then again, they will need to study on their own. The best way to prepare them for this task is to help them become more autonomous. In other word, Learning autonomy or responsibility is an attitude that students may possess to varying degrees. No student is completely without a sense of responsibility; but past learning experience in their classrooms set limits to the development of learning autonomy.

So, how can EFL teachers contribute to the learners' learning?

Developing responsible attitudes in the learner entails some deviation from traditional teacher roles as well. As students begin to take charge of their learning, the teacher needs to take on role of facilitator in an increasing number of classroom learning activities. Teachers may consider classroom tasks in accordance with the learners' needs; and the way teachers share responsibility for the accomplishment of the objective of each lesson. In addition, students' learning responsibility can really only develop if teachers allow more room for learners' involvement.

However, the change in teachers' roles can be perhaps gradual, rather than abrupt and dramatic. There may be expectations about what roles a teacher is supposed to perform. These expectations may be very different from a teacher's roles that facilitate learners' responsibility; and if this is the case, changing them will require much

patience and caution. Teachers may find that learners oppose changes for different reasons. Learners may be afraid of the uncertainties and risks involved in changes in general, or they have negatives learning experiences and are therefore reluctant to do any initiative. The notions discussed above raise the following question.

How teachers can develop learners' learning responsibility and autonomy?

Many times teachers design or create activities that can help learners realize the importance of their contribution and develop the abilities learners to take charge of their own learning. Teachers must realize that somehow there are some learning attitudes that may block the learners' responsibility and autonomy such as motivation and self-confidence.

There is a saying stating that "We can take the horse to the river but it is hard to make it drink" (Harmer, 2007). It means that unless he is willing to do his part (lower his head to reach the river and take in some water), the horse will remain thirsty. The case is even worse if the horse is not thirsty at all. In other words, motivation is prerequisite for learning development. However, teachers should know that not any kind of motivation will do. Teachers need to encourage intrinsic motivation, the source of inner driver or interest of the learner. Intrinsically motivated, learners are more able to identify the goals of learning and that makes them more willing to take responsibility for the outcome. In turn, a larger scope for student self-determination and autonomy generates intrinsic motivation: motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other.

It is important to note that rewards and punishment (extrinsic motivation) can also stimulate learning, but at the same time they increase the dependence of the learner (Brown, 2000). Apart of reinforcing motivation, self-confidence contributes to the development or responsibility in its own right. The learners must believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and they can rely on themselves, not only on the teacher. If the learners can successfully manage their own learning, this kind of learning responsibility and independence brings about a sense of confidence to them.

Learners need also to do self-evaluation in their learning process. When a teacher encourages learners to focus on the process of their learning, he or she helps these learners consciously examine their own contribution to their learning. This way the learners can raise their learning awareness to move ahead and this is indeed the very first step to the development of the responsible attitude. It is therefore, self-evaluation requires the learners to go even further to judge, instead of teacher, their own work as objectively as they can. By doing so, they can formulate an idea of their level of proficiency: discover weak and strong points of their learning to set up their own target of learning. Setting targets for themselves, they are more likely

to consider these targets their own and feel responsible for reaching them.

Learning strategies serve as a tool to improve one's language competence and learners can only be held responsible for their competence if they are aware of these tools. So teachers need to show the students the variety of available strategies, help them to find out what works for them, and help them to discover how and when to use these strategies. Indeed, strategies can bring students to the exciting experience of exploring and expanding their own abilities.

Promoting cooperation in the classroom affects students' attitudes in several ways. It encourages the learners to rely on each other and not only on the teacher. One of the activities is group work. In this activity, students have chances to create and gain opportunities for feedback from peers. They also learn each other's learning strategies that will be useful for their learning enhancement. Later, they may be able to depend on themselves in solving the learning problems. These then are the building blocks of responsible attitudes on the part of the learners. But the development process also requires a certain attitude of a teacher. For example, a willingness in teacher's part to take learners as partners in working towards the common goals and willingness to delegate tasks and decision. There are some ways on how teachers can do to collaborate with the learners.

First of all is sharing information with the learners. By sharing all the relevant information with the learners as partners, the common aim of learning a foreign language can possibly be achieved in working towards the common aim of learning a foreign language. This includes being clear about both short and long term objectives. Telling students about the aims of a particular activity helps them to identify with these aims and hence feel more responsible for the outcome.

Secondly, a consistent control of learners' progress in their learning. It is very important for teachers to clearly establish expectation towards the learners, for example, the limits of acceptable behavior and the consequences of failing to meet expectations. In this case, teachers should apply the rules consistently and learners are willing to play by these rules.

Thirdly, teachers should delegate tasks and decisions to learners. If learners are to take more responsibility for their learning, they need to have more influence on the learning process. This calls for a reallocation of some tasks and decisions in classroom work, so that students can get more involved, for example, in choosing learning materials or correcting mistakes. Students are not trained teachers and cannot take over any teacher's role, but they are surely able to cope with some of the teachers' roles. So, it is important that the teachers should respect the ways learners handle the tasks given, and expect learners to deal with the consequences of their decisions. Teachers should always support learners despite of letting them make mistakes.

Stages in the process of developing learner responsibility and strategy

Learners do not normally wake up and find that they have become responsible overnight. More likely, they go through a slow, gradual process in their learning. Therefore, there are several steps for teachers to develop the learner responsibility:

Raising awareness is starting point. Here teachers present new view-points and new experiences to the learners and encourage them to bring the inner processes of their learning to the conscious level of their thinking. Teachers help them bring discoveries in their language learning. For example, teachers at this stage may somewhat tightly structure and control the students' activities since students are not yet very responsible for and need to be told what to do.

The next step is practicing the skills introduced at the previous stage in order to begin changing attitudes. This is a slow process requiring a lot of practice and patience, since it takes time to go from understanding to practicing new roles and habits, especially when this involves breaking away from stubborn old pattern of behavior. Learners who have little sense of responsibility in general require particular attention and patience. The activities are repeatable and they tend to allow more room for learner initiative.

Transferring roles to learners requires a considerable change in classroom management and so it may be the most demanding phase for the teacher. The activities are loosely structured, giving a considerable amount of freedom to learners in accomplishing tasks, or even, in deciding about tasks. Teachers may see this as a smooth process, where one phase develops into the next. So, even though teachers want learners to be aware of the process as a whole and of the actual changes within each phase, the transition from one phase to another may take some time.

Setting goals by the students themselves is the first step toward autonomous learning. The goal in learning is one's desired result, one's orientation and destination. One cannot learn consciously, independently and autonomously unless they have clear idea of what they are going to achieve. However, in an EFL classroom students are often misled to get high scores so as to please their parents, teachers, etc. Once the examination is over, they begin to relax or are often at a loss how to further develop an interest in English and how to continue English learning by themselves. By contrast if students have a specific and consistent goal in mind, they will be intrinsically motivated, make better use of their time both in class and after class. They keep learning with renewed efforts.

In the process of developing learning autonomy, learners need to be trained on how to set goals to their advantages. Firstly, goals should be practical and set in accordance with curriculum demands and their weaknesses. Students' efforts will be wasted if the goals are too high, too low, or irrelevant to their desired results. Secondly, goals should be meaningful (Brown, 2000). Meaningful

goals can ensure students relate what they have already known to what they are learning and make the whole learning process meaningful. Specifically, meaningful goals are those that are constructive and those that satisfy learners' needs and arouse their interest and enthusiasm.

Guiding students to select suitable strategies

Teachers tend to deliver knowledge with the same teaching style, ignorant to the learners' individual differences in which it becomes another reason for learning inefficiency. As we know learners differ greatly in terms of their language learning foundation, their cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Oxford, 1990; Nunan, 2010) and similarly no best method for all students in any classroom (Gebhard, 2000). Individual differences ranging from learners' language competence to learning styles make it difficult for teachers to take all the individual differences into consideration in the classroom. In this case, it is more necessary for teachers to equip students with effective and specific learning strategies based on their individual differences and needs. Only when they have a clear idea of how to learn, can they achieve their goals in a better and quicker way.

Teachers can also make use of technology to provide learning environment. It is likely that students may communicate with others through internet and other media, for example, discussion boards, interactive blogs, and online forums. The students may also download music, movies, and TV shows which allow them to gain different accents and expressions of the language from around the world.

## Conclusion

Autonomy in learning is a process not a product that many EFL students seek today. Autonomy requires understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses and accumulating a diverse set of resources that will maximize exposure and improvements in four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Skills can be learned by studying independently and with other EFL students but skills can be truly assimilated when they can be confirmed and responded to by a qualified mentor or teacher.

In attempts to promote a higher level of learner autonomy, it is important for teachers to encourage and organize activities and homework assignments that will force students to explore means that could ultimately enforce a greater interest in autonomous learning. In other words, it is the responsibility of the English language teachers to not only teach the language but also to inform and to always encourage the students to study outside the classroom. And, this will be accomplished by presenting tasks that inspire students to take learning into their own hands, hence, it will likely result in successfully improving students' language skills.

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